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Reagan's Drive To Plug News Leaks

Lie detectors, even censoring of former federal employees are to be prime tools for keeping officials' lips sealed.

The exclusion of reporters from Grenada in the first days of the U.S. invasion is just the latest twist in a Reagan administration drive to tighten controls on government information.

The news blackout came on the heels of several other steps denounced by critics as attempts to invoke national security to achieve political ends. Among the steps—

- A proposal to impose prepublication censorship on top government officials even after they have left office.

- A plan to make much wider use of lie-detector tests to trace unauthorized leaks by officials to the press.

- Adoption of regulations that make it harder for citizens to get data through the Freedom of Information Act.

Prepublication censorship is the most controversial of the administration moves. It would require officials with access to very sensitive classified information to sign contracts obliging them to submit books, articles and speeches containing any information gleaned directly or indirectly from intelligence sources to government censors for the rest of their lives.

This would apply even if the information were not classified. About 110,000 federal employees would be affected, including all top officials except the President and Vice President.

"Lifetime censorship." The plan has been called "lifetime censorship" by critics, who argue that it tramples freedom of speech. Even some senior Reagan aides privately voice concern. Says one: "It raises serious questions about First Amendment rights."

Some analysts contend that if the proposal were put into effect, many talented people would turn their backs on government service, while those who took jobs would be discouraged from writing about foreign and defense issues after they left the government.

"It will inhibit public debate and se-

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verely limit participation in that debate by many of the country's best-informed leaders," asserts Patricia Derian, who was an assistant secretary of state in the Carter administration.

Critics also fear that a large censorship bureaucracy would have to be created and that there would be an eventual rise in political mischief as those in power found themselves able to censor criticism by their predecessors.

In defense of the plan, administration aides say they are simply trying to protect national security by stopping the "hemorrhaging" of classified material. "It has gotten to the point that there's no confidence in our government's ability to keep very sensitive classified information," asserts Richard Willard, a Justice Department official who has played a key role in trying to plug leaks.

Reagan officials say they cannot point to specific leaks that damaged the nation because to do so would, in itself, reveal classified information. But Joel Lisker, staff director of the Senate Security and Terrorism Subcommittee, cites this example: A few lines in a news

Administration aides counter that the tests are reliable enough for investigative purposes and are vital in protecting against damaging leaks. Moreover, they say, steps will be taken to guard against invasion of privacy.

Nonetheless, Congress has ordered the Pentagon, where most of the affected employees work, to postpone any change in policy until April 15.

In the case of the Freedom of Information Act, the administration argues that the tighter restrictions were needed to hold down the costs of meeting requests for government documents. It also says that further limits are necessary to better protect business, intelligence and law-enforcement information.

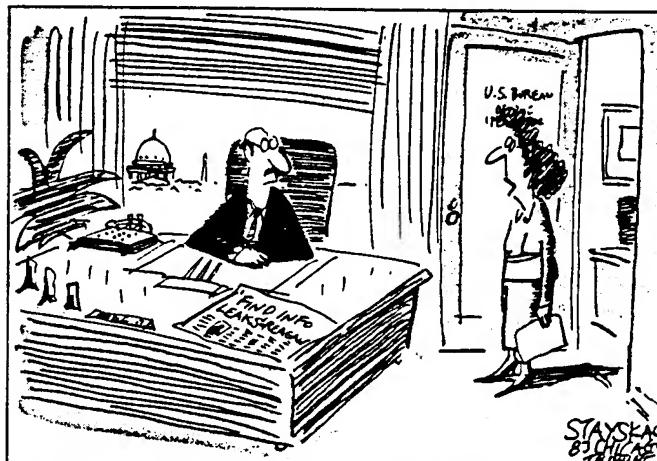
"Contagious disease." Critics insist that other motives are involved. The administration "treats information as if it were a potentially disabling contagious disease that must be controlled, quarantined and ultimately cured," charges Floyd Abrams, a lawyer who represents news organizations.

Although all recent Presidents have been bedeviled by leaks—many from high officials trying to create pressure for policy changes—this administration is willing to go further to stop them than its predecessors. Last year, for example, many top Pentagon officials were given lie-detector tests in a vain effort to find out who leaked to the press a confidential finding that the U.S. could end up spending 750 billion dollars more for defense over five years than the administration had estimated.

A more recent embarrassment: A leaked report that the White House's chief press spokesman, Larry Speakes, considered resigning because he had been kept in the dark about the Grenada invasion. The White House aide responsible for the leak quit under pressure a few days later.

Critics say those leaks are typical in that they are more embarrassing than they are a danger to national security. The critics cite a report by the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigative arm, which found that only two leaks over the past five years involved highly sensitive data of the kinds that would be covered by the censorship and lie-detector proposals.

Yet the administration contends that there is good reason to be concerned about loss of the nation's secrets. Leaks, argues Justice official Willard, have "gotten out of hand." □



"I had to switch your lie-detector test this afternoon from 3 to 1 because you're scheduled to leak some information at 2!"

article made it necessary for the government to spend millions of dollars to modify military equipment after a potential enemy took countermeasures on the basis of the published information.

The Republican-controlled Senate has sided with the critics by passing legislation to delay adoption of the censorship proposal for at least six months. The House is expected to do the same.

Stirring almost as much controversy is the administration's effort to require the same 110,000 employees to submit to "random" lie-detector tests even if they are not suspected of leaking information. Refusal to cooperate could mean loss of security clearance.

Opponents argue that this represents unwarranted intimidation and that, in any case, lie detectors are unreliable.